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ABSTRACT

It is suggested that contrastive linguistics, the systematic comparison of two languages, be considered in the preparation of instructional materials and as a choice of teaching methods and techniques for training translators and interpreters. The contrastive analysis hypothesis suggests that the major source of errors committed by learners of a foreign language is the difference between concepts and linguistic patterns of the source and target language. Two studies of errors made by university students in translating are reported to support the use of contrastive analysis in training translators and interpreters. (JL)

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The Application of Contrastive Linguistics
in Training Translators/Interpreters

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Contrastive linguistics has been a topic for many a dispute for decades. Since the time C.C. Fries proposed the idea which later was pursued by R. Lado in his book linguistics across cultures up to the present, a great number of studies have been conducted on this subject by contrastivists, psychologists, methodologists, and graduate students all over the world; too many to be named in this paper, though. Lado initiated his systematic comparison of two languages on the then sound principle of transfer in psychology. His hypothesis which was later called the strong version of CAH (contrastive analysis hypothesis) stated that the major source of errors committed by the learners of a foreign language is the difference between concepts and linguistic patterns of the source and target language.

Lado's hypothesis became the target of attacks for a number of psychologists experimenting on verbal learning, including J.B. Carroll who claimed that the principle of transfer could not be applied for a system so greatly complex as language. Refuting the strong version of CAH,

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they stated that errors in the target language are in reality signifying the fact that learners have not yet learned the items, so they resort to their native language for help. Whether the source language is interfering or helping is not very much the point of discussion here. The principle of transfer and thereof the idea of proactive and retroactive inhibition, all are indices of the traditional concept of faculty psychology, suggesting that the activities of the brain are compartmentalized. That is, the competence for each language is a separate entity. The items within the two bodies of knowledge relating to the source and target language, having interacted with each other result in what is called interlanguage.

Psycholinguistic theory, today, based on many a revealing experiment, convincingly suggests that mental activities are structured. In other words, for any bit of new information to be processed, it has to find its specific node in the network of information to be anchored. In this process, the bit of new information acts and reacts on many analogous or different nodes of information in the structure to find its proper place to be stored. This is referred to as the process of matching in perception. It could be well noticed that in such a process all closely related items are strongly anchored with one another,

whether they are items in the native or target language. So the concept of native language competence, target language competence, and interlanguage as three separate systems of linguistic information is out of place. There is one single body of knowledge in the form of an interwoven form of network responsible for all linguistic activities of man. The effect of anomie, motivation, affective domain, and culture on learning the target language are all evidence for this claim. In the process of perception, both for construction and utilization of perceived information, a single mental structure is working as a matrix to receive and store the new items of information. In this process a number of interaction between the matrix and any bit of new information could be hypothesized on the basis of observed production of foreign language learners.

In an experiment done on a number of senior university students in translation a paragraph written in their native language was given to be translated into English. Prior to the exposure to the paragraph, it was explained that it was taken from a novel, rather a romance. The paragraph read as follows:

"I was interested in her and once I tried to show to her that I would spend a lot of my time and money for her. So, I decided to invite her to dinner on a Sunday."

The students were asked to translate the last sentence into English. A greatly significant number of them wrote: "I decided to invite her to lunch on Friday." Now, of course, the words in their native language were equivalent to lunch and Friday. However, the concept in the novel was not conveyed by "lunch" and "Friday". The reason for the errors could be explained as follows: The word lunch both in Persian and English refer to midday food as one of its two meanings. The use of the word with this meaning causes no difficulty. But the same word in the two languages refer to a second meaning which is not the same. In Persian it means the big meal of the day, but in English it doesn't. So students made a wrong association. Since the same form in the source language conveys two meanings, students thought that if there was one form in the target language that conveyed one of the two meanings it should necessarily convey the second meaning also. Thus a concept in the native language was wrongly generalized into the target language.

The same phenomenon occurred for the word Friday. In Persian the word Friday conveys two meanings, one is "the day after Thursday" which is equivalent to English, the other one is "weekend" which is shared with the form "Sunday" in English.

Thus to a native speaker of English, the idea that the man in the paragraph wanted to spend a lot of money for dinner and spend a lot of his time during the weekend

was not conveyed. Rather, a native speaker would be surprised at the idea that the man would buy her a sandwich, a big spender, or spend the half an hour of his lunch time on a working day as a sign of interest.

In another study reported by this speaker at the fifth international conference in Applied Linguistics held in Canada, it was found out that students would make interlingual analogy of the similar structures of the present perfect tense in their native and target language. In other words, for some concepts in both Persian and English, the present perfect form is used. So, on the basis of this similarity, they would make the generalization that whenever a meaning in the native language is expressed by means of the present perfect tense, that meaning should necessarily be conveyed in the same form in the target language, also. This generalization is not true in all cases. The concepts in the following sentences are expressed by means of the present perfect tense in Persian:

We have come to school today.

We haven't had lunch today.

We are fasting today.

We are sitting in a hall today.

Thus a significant number of intermediate and advanced students used the present perfect form for all of those sentences in translation.

Also a great number of intralingual errors could be traced back to overgeneralization of a pattern within the target language. The well known sentence

Dady brang home some chocholates.

is an example of overgeneralization of a rule in English stating that the lax high front vowel preceding a velar nasal changes to a low front vowel to form the past tense of the verb such as drank, rang, vary, so why not brang.

It could be stated with a lot of confidence that a general process in the mind responsible for language perception and production is generalization by analogy. This gives rise to the principle of stimulus generalization, a well established phenomenon in psychology, which is claimed to be the main source of a great number of difficulties to be faced by a target language learner. The principle suggests that the different items as well as the same items in the source and target language do not cause much difficulty. Rather, contrary to the traditional view of interference, based on the principle of transfer, the different items attract the attention of the learner, who expect to learn a system different from his source language. Such expectation and the attention paid because of that makes the learning a simple process which contradicts the interference theory. Rather, items which look similar in form, meaning and distribution, but are minutely different from

those of the source language are the source of difficulties.

This is not, however, a new hypothesis at all. It has already been published in Language Learning in 1970, and in Studi Italiani Di Linguistica Teorico Ed Applicata in 1980 by this speaker. But I would like to attract the attention of the audience and the educators and curriculum designers to a tremendous number of observations confirming this hypothesis. It is high time to embark upon a program which seriously considers the hypothesis in material preparation, and choice of teaching methods and techniques for training translators/interpreters.

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